



# Dictatorland: The Men Who Stole Africa

*Paul Kenyon*

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The dictator who grew so rich on his country's cocoa crop that he built a 35-storey-high basilica in the jungles of the Ivory Coast. The austere, incorruptible leader who has shut Eritrea off from the world in a permanent state of war and conscripted every adult into the armed forces. In Equatorial Guinea, the paranoid despot who thought Hitler was the saviour of Africa and waged a relentless campaign of terror against his own people. The Libyan army officer who authored a new work of political philosophy, *The Green Book*, and lived in a tent with a harem of female soldiers, running his country like a mafia family business.

And behind these almost incredible stories of fantastic violence and excess lie the dark secrets of Western greed and complicity, the insatiable taste for chocolate, oil, diamonds and gold that have encouraged dictators to rule with an iron hand, siphoning off their share of the action into mansions in Paris and banks in Zurich and keeping their people in dire poverty.

## Dictatorland: The Men Who Stole Africa Details

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# From Reader Review Dictatorland: The Men Who Stole Africa for online ebook

## Greg says

\* I would like to thank NetGalley and the publisher for the opportunity to review this book \*

British journalist Paul Kenyon delivers a compelling slice of contemporary history in *Dictatorland*. The book looks at the men who led African nations out of colonial exploitation, only to betray their people and enrich themselves. The post-colonial history of countries such as Zimbabwe, Congo, Libya, Nigeria, Cote d'Ivoire, Ghana, Equatorial Guinea and Eritrea are covered, as well as the exploitation of various resources: diamonds, gold, oil, chocolate and slavery.

Kenyon's account of what these men did to their people is chilling and the sheer indifference of Western companies to the human suffering their business causes, to this very day, is horrifying. The rampant greed and savagery on display defies belief, and this is by no means in the past; it continues to this day.

If this book lacks anything, it would be the lack of a unifying theory underlying these horrible histories. Why is post-colonial Africa "Dictatorland"? Why have these savage dictators thrived in some African countries but in others, such as South Africa, similar experiences have not arisen, or at least not to the same degree. However this is still a first-rate piece of journalism and modern history, thoroughly worth the read.

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## Wendy says

Fascinating and informative, could use a bit more proofreading

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## Lyn says

This is a well researched, well written and very interesting book but after a while I started to gag on the repetition of corruption, power mongering, evil, murder and exploitation.

The oft repeated story of idealistic and intelligent men who fought the destruction and exploitation of colonial powers and multi-national companies, and were hailed as heroes and precipitated into power, only to end up just as bad or worse themselves, is depressing in the extreme. One wonders why that cycle is so inevitable - perhaps the problem is that extreme idealists, who have fought long and hard to overturn colonialism, injustice and oppression, just continue to feel they need to eliminate all subsequent opposition as well and come to believe that they, and they alone, can carry through the vision of the liberation. A depressing but worthwhile read.

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## Hannah says

My knowledge of 20th Century history is spotty at best. There are things I am reasonably well-informed about but large parts of history I have cursory knowledge of. The history of Africa is one of those areas (and even typing this makes me cringe - I have to admit to not knowing a lot about a whole fricking continent) and I was very eager to remedy this. As a starting point this book is absolutely perfect. Paul Kenyon manages to give enough of an overview to situate me to then give enough details to keep my interest.

The book is a reasonably comprehensive history of several countries and manages to also connect these parts to a greater whole that gave me a greater understanding how these different dictatorships happened (or are still happening in some cases). We get a greater look into such varied countries as Zimbabwe, Congo, Libya, Nigeria, Cote d'Ivoire, Ghana, Equatorial Guinea and Eritrea. Paul Kenyon structures his book by way of resources the countries own and how these influenced the histories. Starting with diamonds and gold, continuing with oil, talking about cocoa to then show the weird, tragic case of Eritrea where it is not even known what resources might be found there.

There are some things these countries all have in common: the way in which colonialism wrecked them, the way in which other powers influenced them (often in the way of proxy wars in the Cold War era), and the way in which power corrupted people who could have been considered heroes beforehand. It is an endlessly bleak and frustrating history and one that made me think more than once how much people can suck. It is due to Paul Kenyon's wonderful storytelling sensibilities that I managed to keep reading despite the bleak subject matter.

The things that did not quite work for me are probably not fair: for one I sometimes struggled with the structure of the chapters, the timeline was not always very clear and I did not always find the thread connecting these different scenes. However, it is near impossible to tell of history in a neat narrative because history is not neat but rather messy. I would also have liked the sources to be clearer and more extensive. I work in academia and as such I am more used to academic writing which this is not.

Overall, impeccably researched, super readable, important book.

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I received an arc of this book courtesy of NetGalley and Head of Zeus in exchange for an honest review.

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### **Simona Kulakauskaite says**

I really enjoyed reading this fascinating book on African history focused on late colonial and post colonial years. Too often similar books are either too detailed requiring good background knowledge of the events described or fairly superficial barely scratching the surface of the problems explored. This book is nothing like that. It provides sufficient background information and then dwells deep into analysing the regimes of nine African countries. The writing itself is great making this book really difficult to put down.

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### **Jason says**

What a fascinating and at the same time sobering, look into several African dictatorships and how they survived and indeed thrived, thanks to western, Russian, Chinese and American backing.

Paul Kenyon focuses on a few countries including Eritrea where the leader continues to tell his people they are on a permanent war footing and a country that is less accessible than even North Korea. The rise of Robert Mugabe in Zimbabwe is covered and like a lot of the dictators covered in the book, their rise to power is often a mix of luck and being in the right place at the right time.

There is a chapter on cocoa/chocolate production and a look at a particularly murky part of the Cadbury history. Oil and diamonds also feature heavily in the history of Africa as the colonial powers sought to exploit these to meet growing demands back home. Of course leaders in the states concerned such as Zaire as was made the most of this and in turn made millions for the dictator/leader and their associates.

Paul Kenyon mixes his own personal travels and interviews with people involved in the various countries covered, as well as drawing on historical sources, to produce a highly readable book, thought provoking book that leaves the reader wanting to know more about how much of Africa has been exploited by some of its own people and outsiders.

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### **Jonny says**

I wasn't sure how good this would be or whether it would be a quasi-pornographic look at some of the world's most unfortunate countries. Although Kenyon doesn't sugarcoat how vile these regimes are, he draws out both the unique characteristics of each country, as well as what they have in common - it's probably the clearest overview I've read of how catastrophic the Cold War was for many African countries. I won't pretend to be an expert in African politics, but I'd highly recommend this for anyone keen to start understanding more about the 20th century history of some of its countries.

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### **Lakshman Hariharan says**

The sad, oftentimes downright depressing story of the plunder of a great continent by the Europeans and the generals. An essential read for anyone that knows as little as I do about Africa. The bibliography contains references for a lifetime of further learning about the continent for anyone interested.

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### **Eoin Fitzgibbon says**

Loved it. It's basically a short review about the insane and corrupt history of several African nations.

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### **Oliver Bogler says**

Very accessible, unstinting description of the recent history of a handful of African nations that have had a difficult transition from colonial times to independence, and where greedy men have exploited, murdered and wreaked havoc of many kinds for too many years. I read it in a week - couldn't put it down.

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## **John Ashmore says**

A good overview if you don't know much/anything about post-colonial Africa and its various whacky despots. I've read a few critical reviews complaining Kenyon hasn't covered the likes of Idi Amin, but given the amount of potential material he's done a good job of mixing a broad sweep with detail about individual countries.

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## **Janp says**

Having read Martin Meredith's State of Africa and David van Reybrouck's Congo I wasn't sure whether this book would add much to my general knowledge on the continent. I was happily surprised though by how well written this book is and the point of view it takes.

Using the natural resources of the continent as a stance from which the different stories about colonialism, large multinationals, and the postcolonial dictators are being told is refreshing and insightful. The author uses a helicopter view of general historic political developments and zooms in on personal accounts of commoners or former puppets of regimes to enliven his story. This, in combination with an excellent writing style makes the book very worthwhile reading.

The book is not all-encompassing and isn't trying to be. It focuses mainly on the natural resource-rich countries in the west and the -according to many- worst country in the world: Eritrea. There's no pretense however that it describes the entire history of the continent. All in all I'm happy having read this book and I would definitely recommend it to anyone with an average interest in the continent of Africa.

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## **Rajesh Amradi says**

An extraordinary book! Having struggled to find some books or resources that could sum up Africa's history and it's peoples' suffering, I came across this marvel and bought it instantly. I am extremely happy that this book is going to be part of my collection.

The author put great effort in offering most of the important events as interesting stories to read. He brought together all the dictators from the continent, their cruelties towards people, the corrupt minds, the greed, indifference towards victims, mass killings of innocent and armies alike, slavery, and the colonial powers' exploitations of these countries, just as elsewhere, for the massive natural resources.

It offers equally great insights into the decision making, priorities of the top layers of the governments, and business partnerships and investments that went into discovering diamonds, gold, cocoa and how those resources earned them high number of billions.

A few lines are just not enough in describing what this book can offer. It is a must read for anyone that is interested in knowing what went through in the past century in Africa.

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## **Sarmad Qureshi says**

### **Great book**

Well researched and written book. Would be of interest to anyone with an interest in Africa. Surprisingly the same themes emerge in the different countries covered.

Would like to see a second volume where other countries are covered.

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### **James says**

Paul Kenyon is a renowned BBC journalist who's worked on various hard-hitting current affairs strands, not least the BBC's Panorama. He's someone whose work I've long admired. When I saw he had written a book on the dictators who've wreaked havoc throughout Africa, I was keen to read it.

Dictatorland is certainly well written and split into four parts, each corresponding to the "resource curses" which allowed brutal thugs to seize and keep power - gold, oil, chocolate and modern slavery - he troops out a succession of tyrants and their horrific idiosyncrasies for his readership to gawp at.

One of the strengths of Dictatorland is how the author demonstrates that Africa, a continent rich in natural resources, was uniquely placed for such misrule. First the colonial empires, and later those who replaced them, had untold wealth at their fingertips and thus had no need to consider the wishes, or even the needs, of the populace. The world's thirst for gold, diamonds and cocoa ensured that brutal misrule was tolerated at best, actively facilitated at worst, by the international community.

That said, there are a number of flaws to this book. While the author does give the background of colonialism and does demonstrate how the colonial rulers abused their colonies, the lion's share of the narrative focuses on the dictators that came after. I felt that the link between the two was missing somewhat. The brutalism of colonialism and how it stunted civic and political development; the arbitrary division of the continent into artificial states which often lumped hostile ethnic groups together; just how actively the Western powers turned a blind eye to the dictators' behaviour, was not fully fleshed out.

It is also unclear just how the author selected dictators to appear in the book. As The Economist pointed out in their review, some like Mobutu of Zaire (now the Democratic Republic of the Congo), Gaddafi of Libya and Mugabe of Zimbabwe are obvious choices. But why Félix Houphouët-Boigny, the first President of Ivory Coast, and not the far more brutal Idi Amin of Uganda or Jean-Bedel Bokassa of the Central African Republic? One can only presume that Houphouët-Boigny was chosen as he based his rule on the cocoa trade.

A final issue, is that while this is a fascinating read, it can also be a little tiring. Reading of the wickedness of dictator after dictator, with no real prognosis for change, is a bit repetitive and blunts the reader's outrage. Reading Dictatorland, one might be forgiven the temptation to write Africa off as hopeless, a continent uniquely susceptible to misrule and oppression.

That all said, this is a very well written book. Despite my misgivings outlined above, it did keep me turning the page. If you're interested in dictators, what colonialism has reaped, the damaging legacy the European empires left the continent and the misrule that more often than not results when a country's rulers have untold

riches at their disposal, then this is an enlightening, if depressing, read.

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